

The Mental Health Toll from the Coronavirus—Part 2

This article is from Tom Insel.

The Mental Health Toll from the Coronavirus Could Rival that of the Disease Itself



For some, the challenges are already beginning. Presently, about one third of Americans say they have experienced “high levels” of psychological distress such as anxiety, sleeplessness, or depression at some point during the extended period of social distancing because of the present circumstances, according to a study by Pew Research Center, released in early May. Kaiser Family Foundation put the number Americans for whom worry or stress had caused at least one negative effect on mental health and wellness at 56 percent. Calls to a government, disaster distress helpline were up tenfold in April from the previous year. A Los Angeles suicide and help hotline handled 8,000 percent more calls than usual in February and March.

Domestic abuse hotlines are also seeing increased activity. More than 5,000 people have reportedly called the National Domestic Violence Hotline since mid-March, specifically referring to COVID as the catalyst for their problems.



In recent years, psychologists have established strong evidence that loneliness is linked to higher levels of anxiety, depression, alcoholism, and drug abuse. It can also be a threat to physical health. Lonely people feel more pain, which has some public health officials worried about a second spike in opium use. Lonely people are also more likely to get physically sick. The impact of social isolation on mortality is greater than obesity, smoking 15 cigarettes a day, or high blood pressure, researchers have found.



“The recognition of the impact of social isolation on the rest of our mental health is going to hit everyone really soon,” says Kay Tye, a neuroscientist at the Salk Institute for Biological Science, who studies the brain circuits involved in loneliness. “The impact on mental health will be pretty intense and pretty immediate.”

How lethal the fallout turns out to be may depend on the depth and duration of the current economic downturn. One study based on data from Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey, found that every one percent rise in unemployment preceded a two percent increase in the number of drug overdose deaths. Another found that a one percent uptick in unemployment was associated with a 1.6 percent rise in the number of people who succeed in taking their own lives.

Suicides were already rising when the pandemic hit. The US has seen a 33 percent increase since the year 2000, according to an analysis released last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which placed the rate at 14 deaths by suicide for every 100,000 Americans—the highest age-adjusted suicide rate recorded in the US since 1942. Although men were still three times as likely to kill themselves as women, female suicide rates increased by 53 percent between 1999 and 2017, almost twice the rate of increase for men.

Insel attributes the spike to a wide range of factors ranging from a lack of treatment options for the mentally ill to societal factors that are adding to stress and uncertainty. COVID-19, however, “really adds fuel to the fire.”

The most ominous warnings are emerging from a report on “projected deaths of despair” from COVID-19 by the Robert Graham Center, a think tank associated with the American Academy of Family Physicians and the nonprofit Well Being Trust. They are predicting tens of thousands of additional deaths from suicide, alcohol, and drug overdoses, depending on the extent of the economic dislocations and action taken to help those who are struggling. Their estimates range from an additional 27,644 if there is a quick recovery with the smallest impact on unemployment. In a worst case scenario, they predict the number of additional Americans who will die from suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related deaths will hit 154,037.

Self-medicating

Even if the mental health system had the capacity to treat everyone, research and history show that 50 to 60 percent of those who need treatment fall through the cracks. Most people don’t seek care, instead turning to alcohol and drugs. Some withdraw, becoming more isolated. Some become angry and uncontrollably violent or self-destructive. In the months and years ahead, we will be battling an epidemic we may not always be able to see.




Social distancing may be fueling opioid abuse, worries Elinore F. McCance-Katz, assistant secretary for mental health and substance use at the Department of Health and Human Services. When doctors cannot meet face to face with patients, they are more likely to prescribe addictive drugs, she says.

Research in social epidemiology suggests that the absence of positive social relationships is a significant risk factor for broad-based morbidity and mortality. Evidence indicated that loneliness heightens sensitivity to social threats and motivated the renewal of social connections, but it can also impair executive functions, sleep, and mental and physical well-being.

Relationships are one of the keys to hope. Don’t be alone! Losing hope is often a symptom of being alone. Think about it—when you are feeling down, what helps you feel better faster than a close family member or friend entering your world and comforting you? When you are struggling to achieve a goal, isn’t it amazing how your perspective changes when a friend comes alongside to encourage you or maybe appreciate the progress you have made?¹



Comfort, encouragement, and appreciation are three of your “God-ordained” relational needs that, when met through caring relationships, remove aloneness and foster hope! Looking further into to these three relational needs, we would notice these descriptions:

Need	Definition	Jesus	“One another”	Principle
 COMFORT	Responding to a hurting person with words, feelings, and touch; to hurt with and for another’s grief or pain	<i>“They said to Him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept” (John 11:35).</i>	2 Corinthians 2:7 Romans 12:15b	Matthew 5:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 Acts 9:31
 ENCOURAGEMENT	Urging another to persist and persevere toward a goal; stimulating toward love and good deeds, particularly when someone is weary	<i>“Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).</i>	1 Thessalonians 5:11 Hebrews 3:13 Hebrews 10:25	Romans 1:12
 APPRECIATION	Expressing thanks, praise or commendation; recognizing accomplishment or effort particularly for what someone does	<i>“I have not found such great faith” (Matthew 8:10).</i>	Thessalonians 5:12	1 Peter 2:14 Colossians 2:7

A spirit-empowered disciple loves people through living a Spirit-led life of doing good in all of life: relationships and vocation, community and calling.

“...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him” (Acts 10:38).

Pause and Reflect: Now it’s your turn to reach out with hope as you text or message a family member or friend, sharing a simple message like:

- *“I’m sorry for all the hassle you’re going through without a job and the added stress at home.”* (comfort)
- *“You’ll get on top of that class you’re struggling in as your diligence kicks into gear. I’m cheering for you!”* (encouragement)
- *“With all that is happening in your life, I’m grateful for you reaching out to so many of your friends just to check on them. Well done!”* (appreciation) *“I have just messaged (who) _____ with this message of _____ by simply saying _____.”*

Undoubtedly, your friend or family member will be a little less alone, possibly a little more hopeful, AND you also will find additional hope as you put your focus for a few minutes on caring and connecting with others!

¹House, J., Landis, K., & Umberson, D. (1988) Social relationships and health. *Science*, 241(4865), 540-545. Doi:10.1126/science.3399889

